

**THE HE ACADEMY BUSINESS, MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTANCY
CONFERENCE 2005, EALING, LONDON**

**RUNNING A PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC-RELATED TEAM IN AN
ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT**

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Abstract

This paper considers the position of a large full-range business school and ways in which it can improve its efficiency and effectiveness, and enhance students' learning environment by the strategic use of academic-related staff within key roles in the School. Some of these roles have traditionally been undertaken by academic staff, but the increased complexity of the Business School environment makes it impossible for academic staff to undertake all roles if the School wants to be innovative and successful in a highly changing external environment. The investigation is carried out via a series of semi-structure interviews, conducted with academic and academic-related staff across the School. This is compared with a review of recent literature in the subject. The paper concludes that both the efficient running of the School and the learning environment of students are improved via the partnership of academics and support staff. The findings reveal, however, that the use of academic-related staff must be done sensitively, to ensure that institutions do not become over bureaucratic or academics alienated in the drive to focus on the student experience.

Introduction

This paper takes as its starting point the complexity of running a large, full-range Business School, Aston Business School, in the current HE environment. Such Schools are multi-million pound businesses (£19m in this case) operating across a wide range of activities, from teaching at many levels, research, consultancy and scholarship, to financial management, marketing, fund raising and international development. Many schools are responding to such diverse portfolios by no longer relying just on academic staff to fill many of their senior administrative and managerial roles.

It is currently a difficult climate in which to recruit academic staff, as potential staff members are scarce in certain areas, and there is much competition in the run up to the next Research Assessment Exercise. It often appears, therefore, to be a waste of time and resources to take up the time of an excellent teacher and researcher with administrative activities, such as recruitment or fund raising, or even student support.

Instead, some schools are employing specialist professional staff, who have been recruited because of their organisational ability, their management experience and their specialist skills in marketing, financial management, languages, HRM policy and practice, or IT skills, for example. Such staff members are appointed to non-academic

contracts. They are individuals who (usually) actually **like** administration and have been recruited because they are good at it. In addition, they often have the formal qualifications and experience which equips them for the tasks they undertake in the school, something which is not always true of the academic staff placed in equivalent roles.

This paper examines the respective roles of academics and academic-related staff within the School, and explores the attitudes of staff towards these different groups. These attitudes are drawn from a series of interviews with academic staff at different levels of the institution, as well as key academic-related staff. The views of Aston staff on the strengths and weaknesses of such a system are analysed and this empirical research is related to a review of recent literature on the subject. From this analysis conclusions are drawn on the relevant status of academic-related staff within the School. The findings suggest that the days of the academic amateur may be at an end and certainly will be if the cost effectiveness and efficacy of this method of recruitment is understood. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, the students' learning experienced can be improved.

Background

This paper is based on a case study based at the authors' institution. The authors use their own positions as academic-related staff within a large School, where leading mixed teams of academic and academic-related staff is a key task undertaken by them both. Aston Business School is a full range, research-led, School with activities across undergraduate, postgraduate and management development provision, as well as hosting a large doctoral programme, encouraging academic staff to undertake high-level, internationally recognised, research and consultancy, and running a self-funding residential and conference operation. In the School all the main administrative roles are taken by non-academic (academic-related and secretarial) staff. The School has over 100 academic and research staff, organised into six academic groups, and 65 support staff spread across the whole School, with the largest groups of over 20 support staff each, based in the Undergraduate and Postgraduate programmes, and smaller teams elsewhere. The staff members within these teams are involved in running examinations, marketing and student recruitment, student support, placements, management of support staff, and course development. There is also a

central team which carries out functions across the whole School, including financial management, fundraising, marketing, IT support and coordinating quality assurance and enhancement activities. Student fees are 2000 (Undergraduate), 500 (Postgraduate), and 100 (Doctoral).

Literature Review

It is worth starting this review by identifying what many see as the main differences between academic and academic-related staff. Whereas an academic's first commitment is to their discipline, for support staff it is to the institution that they are working for. As Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) have stated, 'academic and non-academic employment and career development are quite different in nature ... Non-academic work is linked to particular positions while academic work and career advancement are determined by skills and past performance...' (p.16). It is important to bear this difference in mind when reflecting on the possibilities of developing beneficial partnerships between the two groups. This difference in motivation certainly identifies the need to engender a shared understanding between the two groups if academic-related staff members are to play a bigger part in new roles within business schools and universities.

The researchers have identified two strands in the literature. The first sees the increased roles of non-academic staff as more positive. This strand concentrates more on the experience of students and their learning processes and environments, as well as addressing the requirements of new external pressures. The second strand is more negative about these developments, focusing on academics and their rights and traditional roles. This strand concentrates on loss of control and collegiality amongst academic staff (often coming from within the Labour Process discipline).

Via the literature it is possible to identify the main changes and pressures affecting HE institutions which might lead to changes in procedures and organisational structures, and thus a strategic shift to the greater use of support staff. A number of authors point to the unprecedented change in HE over the last ten years, much of it comes from the external environment (e.g. Willmott, 1995 and Wilson, 1991). Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) identify the enormous changes around the world in the

sector and the pace of change which seems ever faster. 'Long standing and cherished values and practices are being questioned ... by various stakeholders, including students, industry and government,' (p.1). Jones et al (2001), for example, list such external pressures as increased access to HE, marketisation of education (p.2), and increased diversity (p.3). Bryson adds to this list the move from an elite to a mass education system because over the last 40 years there has been a tenfold increase in students (p.38), abolition of tenure for academic staff, introduction of tuition fees, and greater focus on standards and accountability (p.39). Hodgkinson and Brown (2003), acknowledge the effect of this change on a business school, in a similar way to the Aston case study on which this paper is based. 'The School, in common with other Schools in the UK, has had to cope with considerable changes of the external environment' (p.343). In this case the School reacted by developing a learning organisation, established a quality steering group with members from all staff groupings, and adopted a 'bottom-up approach.' An earlier study at Aston identified that the recent changes had led to the greater size and complexity of the operation (Miller and Higson, 1999, p.2).

Such enormous change has definitely led to greater competition within the HE sector (Higson and Miller, 1997) and a greater need for entrepreneurial and imaginative approaches to management. Shattock relates this need directly to employment of non-academic staff:

To be entrepreneurial institutions need close working relationships and trust between the academic and the administrative communities so that the administrators have the self-confidence to work with the academic community as equal partners and can challenge it on policy issues without appearing to seek to become the dominant partner. (p.156)

Dill (1999) calls this approach adjusting 'to a new, more competitive environment' (p.131).

A number of authors see greater accountability in terms of a range of different quality assurance reviews and audits as a significant influence on methods of employment in HE institutions. There is much more **measuring** of learning (Dill, 1999, p.143) and evaluation of units (p.145) which is putting pressure on institutions (p.127). Dill sees 'new academic structures and processes for quality assurance within universities are often implemented as a means of bringing academic behaviour into conformance with

stated academic standards of goals' (p.133). Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) identify that there is much dissatisfaction about such methods of increasing accountability and quality assurance, they add a lot of administrative work to the non-core load of academic staff (p.10). But the research selectivity exercise, which concentrates completely on the core work of academic staff members is one of the measuring exercises identified in the literature.

Clearly, much of the changes across the HE sector are due to funding and resource issues, including the reduction of the unit of resource (e.g. Higson and Miller, 1997). Universities are now expected 'to be more self financing and productive' (Willmott, 1995, p.1004). This goes against the former position where academics were regarded as public sector workers for whom it was not important to make profits or to be market driven (Ibid, p.996). Competition for resources is seen as really tight, and forces changes in use of staff: 'Inevitably this competition for scarce resources has led universities to put greater pressure on their staff and to seek to more actively manage them.' (Jackson, 2001, p.405). 'Continuing cuts in government funding have meant that there has had to be more forward planning and swift decision-making. Greater power has, thus, accrued to administrators ...' (Miller and Higson, 1999, p.3-4).

This increased managerialism occupies a lot of the literature (e.g Bryson, 2004, p.40). 'In the UK, the development of increased university management and an ideology of managerialism is directly related to the increased size and complexities of universities. (Miller and Higson, 1999, p.2). 'Higher education is being repositioned as an industry, rather than as a social institution ... The rise of academic management, together with the rise of consumerism and political concerns with the exchange and user value of higher education, have produced new organisational cultures and professional priorities' (Morley, 2001, p.131). Much of it questions this adaptation of management techniques from the commercial world to academia, which they consider to be inappropriate ('commodification of academic labour and the managerial control of academic work' (Willmott, 1995, p.993)).

Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) consider changing patterns of work for academics arising from this managerialism. In the past 'universities more so than most organisations [were] based on a culture of individualism and academic personal

autonomy' (p.1). Some authors regard this as retrograde and point to a loss of control for academics, who had previously been one of the only group of workers whose contracts gave them self control. As Wilson (1991) says: 'The crucial issue is the changed form of control, the loss of previous high trust/high discretion status and the extent to which collegiality and 'responsible autonomy' become displaced by tight management control,' (p.250). Reflecting on work produced within the Labour Process tradition Higson and Miller (1997) (the former an administrator and the latter an academic) questioned 'whether the administrators in middle levels in the universities' hierarchy constitute part of the group of academic managers who are arguable taking control of academic labour. In crude terms is one of us (the administrator) exercising increasing managerial control not only over secretaries but also over the academics?' (p.3).

Some of the literature suggests that this type of management is leading to a deskilling of academic work, so that it can be transferred to other staff, or so that academic status is decreased (Bryson, 2004, p.42). Wilson (1991) explores this issue further and concludes that there is little deskilling precisely because of the appropriate displacement of tasks to non-academic staff (p.257-8). Bryson (2004) further suggests that the traditional values are still strong and that academic staff still have plenty of control (p.41). Brew and Boud (1996) agree. The autonomous nature of academic work means that academic staff still have considerable freedom to take on as much or as little as they choose (p.2). But there are undoubtedly some changes in power relations, brought on, for example, by the greater distance of academic staff from some new distance learning processes which has the 'effect in shifting the balance of power between a fragmented faculty and strong administration' (Besser and Bonn, 1996, p.6)). In situations like this academic staff members do not reign supreme, institutions begin to depend more on collective responsibility.

The literature points out both the negative and positive influence of non-academic staff to HE. Conway (2000) recognises that some negative views have been due to the lack of recognition for university administrators across the sector (p.199). Shattock (2003) admits that 'sluggish, conservative administrators, librarians and IT staff constrain universities and limit their opportunities, as well as contributing to breakdowns and creating internal dislocations,' (p.144). He continues that, 'the more

administrators lack intellectual confidence the more they are likely to lose sympathy with the mores for academic life ... The greater the tolerance or lack of understanding the more a split can appear between administrative and academic cultures to the disadvantage of the institution.' (p.179) Powis (2001) acknowledges that there must be appropriate training for staff who take on these, previously academic tasks, to avoid negative effects (p.12).

On the positive side, Shattock believes that that we underestimate the role of non-academic staff at our peril.

'A besetting weakness in many universities is to regard non-academic appointments not simply as secondary to academic appointments but, as of having no managerial significance to the institution ... the cumulative effect of appointing, developing and retaining good staff at all levels who have high morale and work well together can be of critical importance both in departmental performance and overall in the institution maintaining an edge over its competition, moving more quickly and being publicly regarded as being more effective. ... They should be encouraged from an early point in their careers to contribute ideas and solutions to institutional problems, they should have frequent changes of duties to broaden their professional experience and they should be stimulated by participation in policy discussion.' (p.143)

Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) discuss the Dearing Report (1997) recommendation that universities should review their staffing policies, but consider that the report gave no guidance on how to do this. These authors believe that Dearing failed 'to recognise the diversity and professionalism of non-academic work in universities' (p.1).

As mentioned earlier, the most positive literature on the role of non-academic staff stems from an approach which concentrates more on student learning rather than organisational arrangements. This approach begins with the premise that demands on academic staff now range far more widely than the traditional teaching and research. Brew and Boud (1996) explain that there was emphasis in the past on preparing academic staff for their teaching role. 'There has been a significant shift from thinking that clever people can do everything to a recognition of the complexity and range of academic work' (p.1) and the recognition that academic staff cannot do everything. The corollary of this is a 'diffusion and blurring of roles' (Coaldrake and

Stedman, 1999, p.14) within HE institutions which even involves 'breaking down the distinction of academic and allied staff' (Brew and Boud, 1996, p.2).

Changing attitudes to student learning have clearly been the spur for this blurring of roles. In the previous teaching and learning model, management and leadership was based on academic authority because these were seen as totally reliant on academic staff. As Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) have shown, 'deeper understanding of the nature of student learning ... [demands] a more professional approach to university teaching.' (p.13-14) This new outlook on enhancing student learning involves the emphasis moving from teaching to learning, and thus away from just academic input to a student's learning. This now could become a partnership between academic and other staff. Writing about librarians in HE, Powis (2001) discusses 'the concept of librarians working in partnership with academics ... with subject librarians working with courses to deliver a range of information skills.' (p.11) Similarly, Hodgkinson and Brown (2003) describe how the School-wide Learning Group worked together to enhance the quality of student learning (p.344). A number of enthusiastic authors evidence how such cross-functional groups working in learning partnerships can improve the learning environment (e.g. Jones et al, 2001). This kind of work is seen as successfully breaking down traditional barriers. Once again talking about librarians, Brindley (2001) says 'Increasingly librarians will be judged as part of multi-skilled teams, as effective collaborators ... In higher education it is about how far the professional librarian is contributing to the quality of student learning, to the research productivity of scholars, and to graduate, professional education.' (p.6) Brew and Boud (1996) approach this issue through work-based and action learning which they see as appropriate arenas for this cross-disciplinary work. They chart the 'shift way from an emphasis on educating high flying students, towards the integration of professional and vocational education within courses more broadly' (p.1) and see this as 'a vehicle for integrating staff development of academics with that of allied staff' (p.6).

New patterns of learning are identified as a very fruitful area for greater use of non-academic staff in traditionally academic roles. 'Changes in technology and information resources meant academics no longer had the time and expertise to

inform their students of successful information strategies' (Powis, 2001, p.11).

Developing distance learning methods is always a way to make one think:

'Also crucial is understanding the cultural changes involving the relationships between faculty and administrators brought about by distance independent learning ... issues of the number and nature of faculty positions, the administrative role in determining curriculum ... Instruction that is delivered through communications media is more amenable to administrative control than instruction that takes place in real-time, real-place.' (p.5)

As Coaldrake and Stedman (1999) summarise, 'the actually and potential blurring of roles is important and will continue to grow in significance as universities move in to more flexible modes of delivery of teaching and learning and as they seek to support and reward staff.' (p.16)

This approach is one which it is possible to demonstrate is also happening in other sectors related to HE. The changing role of the librarian in supporting student learning has already been mentioned. Coaldrake and Stedman also discuss the role of computer and technical support as well as 'equity units, staff development, learning support and instructional design' (p.15). Chan and Heck (2002) consider developments within the health services context, where recent political, social and economic changes have required similar changes in how healthcare is delivered. The result has been the development of multi-disciplinary teams (p.47).

Methodology

As the basis for this case study, interviews were held with eight members of staff working within Aston Business School. These staff members were chosen on the basis of their ability to reflect different perspectives on the issue under discussion. They ranged from very senior professorial staff, through lecturers and members of academic related support staff. Those interviewed had worked at Aston Business School for between five and fifteen years. Many of them had also worked in other institutions (some for considerable time) and they were encouraged to compare the situation at Aston with other institutions. The interviews were conducted by the two researchers separately, using a semi-structured interview format, designed by piloting on each other. Each interview lasted about forty-five minutes.

Findings

1. Impact on the teaching and learning environment

The interviews reveal that the division of responsibilities between academics and support staff seems clearly understood by staff and students at Aston Business School. Respondents were in agreement that these arrangements benefited both students and academic staff. These benefits had arisen because the focus of the support teams (Undergraduate, Postgraduate, Doctoral) is dedicated towards students and is highly customer oriented. Students have a “one stop shop” for support from the teams of programme support staff. Respondents believed that this freed academics to focus on academic activities. As one said, “The more time academics have to do the academic bit, not just in terms of writing papers, but the fact that the mechanisms are in place to put on a new course, are crucial to the learning and teaching environment.”

Another said: “The support I get (as a programme director) in terms of the amount of person time is more than I would get at most places I suspect. ... There has to be a strategic role in this and if I’m spending all my time dealing with admin stuff ... then you have no chance of doing anything long term.”

Respondents all believed that administrative and other support had improved communication to students. One said: “It enhances their whole experience. They know they will get the service they require.” Another agreed that one “carefully managed process” brought “better informed choices eg option choices.” As academic-related staff were involved in such counselling activities, “Academics have more of their time freed up for seeing students on academic issues not on administrative issues. That’s got to be positive if their office hours are filled up with students who have come to see them about problems on their module rather than problems which could be dealt with elsewhere.”

Furthermore, such solid support allowed for innovation in the curriculum: “If the support isn’t there you don’t use the technology available, so in lectures can only get through half the stuff in the time. In general all things like that seem to be well done here. Makes it easier to be innovative to do new things, do new courses.”

In summary, there were no dissenters amongst those interviewed to the view that these arrangements contribute positively to the students' teaching and learning environment.

2. **Impact on academics**

The academic staff respondents did, however, see both positive and negative aspects to the arrangements. Administrative staff saw only the benefits, and this is something to be borne in mind when designing such a structure. The negative aspects revealed by the academics included the view that academics tended to turn up do their bit and then leave, and because of this could become "jobbing academics", distanced from the whole operation and not buying in to the institution. Some quotes which summarise these views include:

"makes you more a cog in the machine"

"lack of freedom to set things you would want"

Together with this view went the feeling that the level of bureaucracy had increased from that experienced previously, when "we were allowed to do what we wanted." In carrying out the personal tutoring role, for example: "We get a list sent to us and we have to send the forms back. It has become more formalised since I started here." Or with reference to postgraduate distance learning teaching, "which again, we do just turn up when we're told. It's all arranged by the support staff."

The interviews revealed some instances where programme teams of support staff were seen to side with students rather than with academic staff because of their "customer" orientation. For example, one respondent said that the "admin side too focused on students and not on academics." Another said:

"Sometimes it's a question of, a student has complained, what are you going to do about it? Common that the correct response is "nothing", because students don't know what's good for them. If the external examiner thinks the quality is appropriate, then the quality is appropriate. Sometimes both the Postgraduate and Undergraduate office take the view that they are on the students' side, and if a student complains it must be right and it must need dealing with. There are limits I guess."

Others saw the outlook of academic-related staff as more balanced: "The support staff are the "in between", they are not definitely on the lecturers' side, they are not

definitely on the students' side a stand alone body that make decisions more objectively." This was particularly true of the Postgraduate Programme where there was acknowledgement of the high expectations of students paying such large fees. "They do have a different level of expectation about what support they get. They expect the world; they expect everything to be in place for them."

Some administrative processes were, however, seen by academic staff as potentially compromising them and the academic validity of the students' learning experience:

"The resource pack, when they need it in advance, it does put pressure on in terms of... you might well want to update materials, but because the deadline is fast approaching, and you haven't had time, you might end up having to use the same materials again for the next year, even though it wasn't what you wanted to do. I understand the reasons for it but it does mean that material is sometimes difficult to update as much as you would like to."

This view of the tension between academic and support staff provides a thoughtful commentary on the message coming from a number of respondents:

"Got to have an academic at the head of it. Get the academic philosophy filtering down through the admin structure. That's quite positive. Has a good impact on the culture. The academic philosophy is about the quality of what you are doing. The philosophy of the support staff can be that these people are customers and we have to do everything we can to make their experience enjoyable and worthwhile. The academic philosophy is, that is fine to a point, but there are higher obligations like to professional bodies who have got to accredit a course, like to employers, that you want the degree to have a certain quality and consistency, otherwise over time the way in which that degree is perceived goes down. So you can't just treat them as customers. Sometimes the clashes that have come in the past have been over that treatment of the student as a customer. Yes they are to an extent, but only to an extent."

The positive attitudes of academic staff to the support structure in the School were, however, also clear and unanimous. They believed that the loss of many administrative responsibilities to academic-related staff, and the support given to them as academics by these staff, frees them to concentrate on academic activities. Examples given were course and programme development and innovations in teaching methods. One newly appointed academic said that they were:

“Pleasantly surprised how little I had to do to get a new course up and running. Compared with other places, to get a new course running and the amount of admin that has to go with that, which is significant when we come to talking about teaching and learning experiences for students, if the amount of admin required is a disincentive to putting on a new course, and when you think the reason for a new course is because it reflects current research or because it reflects the way the subject is going, if there is a big disincentive to do that, that needs addressing.”

Academics were more relieved and grateful that these tasks have been taken off them, than feeling deprived. “Students come to us to ask about coursework extensions. That’s one where the students seem to think they should naturally come to us. We end us saying you need to talk to the coursework office to ask about an extension. That’s nice to be able to say, whatever the issues are, there’s a set procedure. As a lecturer I quite like to be able to say that rather than try and make a judgement myself.” Or “Given what academics now do in terms of admissions, which is to look at predicted grades and give out offers,why academics still do that. Instead of having perfectly competent support staff who can do it. Why have academics doing that when they are neither qualified or often interested in doing it?”

3. Overall findings from interviews

Respondents were asked what areas of work could be taken on by administrative staff and what areas should be retained by academics. Areas that it was suggested could still be taken on in Aston Business School included invigilation of examinations, and personal tutoring. One respondent thought that more involvement in teaching and research by administrative staff would be beneficial because – “everyone should do it” and “Doing research engages you with the academics.”

Areas which respondents thought should not be taken on by administrative staff included: advice “on individual learning and curriculum and appropriateness of modules.” “research leadership” and “all aspects to do with academic quality, course content, make up of the syllabus.”

Conclusions

It is clear from the findings that the interviews replicate much of the general views identified in the literature review. Respondents felt that when the arrangements work it was because of team work, with contributions from the different parties (academics and support staff) equally valued. As one respondent said: "Some gripes about maybe not appreciating the academic side of things with lead times on certain issues, but the positives far outweigh the negatives." And from another: "Certain jobs have been taken away from academics by support staff which is great that they can do that, and we don't have to do it. They are probably better at it than we are as well!" Finally, there was an acknowledgement that the role of the academic-related staff is important in meeting ambitious academic goals: "Some of the roles they are taking, if we are serious about being research led, and we want us to spend time on research, then it's important that those roles are taken away and dealt with, especially as the School is growing as well, and student numbers have increased so dramatically."

It is clear, however, that academics believe that for the partnerships with academic-related staff to work academic philosophy needs to prevail. It is, therefore, essential that there is academic leadership to head up the administrative programme teams, which are such an important part of Aston's support to students. This view was supported by administrators, who acknowledged that: "we see them from our point of view only – we can be narrow minded" and, therefore, we need to be "led by academic staff" Academics "must be seen as having an input" "There could be negative outcomes if we did not try and engage the academics. It has to be managed carefully to ensure that they are engaged in the administrative processes."

"I think they (the division of responsibilities) can only be successful if you've got good working relationships and it would not work so well if we did not get the buying in of academics or if they were alienated in any way eg if you were too prescriptive or bureaucratic or inflexible." What is implied here clearly is that the introduction of academic-related staff to the organisation to work along-side academics must be managed with sensitivity. Recruitment of the right staff, training of these staff and engendering a shared understanding of each others outlooks does not happen by accident. Additionally, these support staff must be accountable to their academic colleagues. They have to be able to justify what they are doing and, most important of all, "they cannot just do it because it would be more administratively practical to do it,

got to bear in mind academics' interests. Got to be aware of what other functions academics have to perform.”

It appears that Aston Business School is managing to create about the right balance, but must be careful that this balance is maintained. As one administrator said:

“We have not taken away all the power and decision making from the academics, we involve the academics a lot and rely on them for their input. Academics appreciative of what we do. They are not completely hands off. We work together as a team. We have different responsibilities”

What would be interesting to explore is whether it is easier for business schools to succeed in this area. Does their experience of management give them a better insight into the advantages of such partnerships and also the academic accountability required. As one respondent said: “Business schools in general are probably very different from all other departments in the sense that activities are much more managed....View that you can manage certain processes. Aston has taken that view wholly on board” And in such a situation, as Court (2001) says, ‘Academic-related staff play a key role in supporting and complementing the work of their academic colleagues.’ (p.13)

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